

ÉMILE ZOLA

THE THREE CITIES
TRILOGY: LOURDES,
VOLUME 4

ЭМИЛЬ ЗОЛЯ

**The Three Cities Trilogy:
Lourdes, Volume 4**

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Émile Zola

The Three Cities Trilogy: Lourdes, Volume 4

LOURDE THE FOURTH DAY

I

THE BITTERNESS OF DEATH

AT the Hospital of Our Lady of Dolours, that morning, Marie remained seated on her bed, propped up by pillows. Having spent the whole night at the Grotto, she had refused to let them take her back there. And, as Madame de Jonquiere approached her, to raise one of the pillows which was slipping from its place, she asked: "What day is it, madame?"

"Monday, my dear child."

"Ah! true. One so soon loses count of time. And, besides, I am so happy!

It is to-day that the Blessed Virgin will cure me!"

She smiled divinely, with the air of a day-dreamer, her eyes gazing into vacancy, her thoughts so far away, so absorbed in her one fixed idea, that she beheld nothing save the certainty of her hope. Round about her, the Sainte-Honorine Ward was now quite deserted, all the patients, excepting Madame Vetu, who lay at the last extremity in the next bed, having already started for the Grotto. But Marie did not even notice her neighbour; she was delighted with the sudden stillness which had fallen. One of the windows overlooking the courtyard had been opened, and the glorious morning sunshine entered in one broad beam, whose golden dust was dancing over her bed and streaming upon her pale hands. It was indeed pleasant to find this room, so dismal at nighttime with its many beds of sickness, its unhealthy atmosphere, and its nightmare groans, thus suddenly filled with sunlight, purified by the morning air, and wrapped in such delicious silence! "Why don't you try to sleep a little?" maternally inquired Madame de Jonquiere. "You must be quite worn out by your vigil."

Marie, who felt so light and cheerful that she no longer experienced any pain, seemed surprised.

"But I am not at all tired, and I don't feel a bit sleepy. Go to sleep? Oh! no, that would be too sad. I should no longer know that I was going to be cured!"

At this the superintendent laughed. "Then why didn't you let them take you to the Grotto?" she asked. "You won't know what to do with yourself all alone here."

"I am not alone, madame, I am with her," replied Marie; and thereupon, her vision returning to her, she clasped her hands in ecstasy. "Last night, you know, I saw her bend her head towards me and smile. I quite understood her, I could hear her voice, although she never opened her lips. When the Blessed Sacrament passes at four o'clock I shall be cured."

Madame de Jonquiere tried to calm her, feeling rather anxious at the species of somnambulism in which she beheld her. However, the sick girl went on: "No, no, I am no worse, I am waiting. Only, you must surely see, madame, that there is no need for me to go to the Grotto this morning, since the appointment which she gave me is for four o'clock." And then the girl added in a lower tone: "Pierre will come for me at half-past three. At four o'clock I shall be cured."

The sunbeam slowly made its way up her bare arms, which were now almost transparent, so wasted had they become through illness; whilst her glorious fair hair, which had fallen over her

shoulders, seemed like the very effulgence of the great luminary enveloping her. The trill of a bird came in from the courtyard, and quite enlivened the tremulous silence of the ward. Some child who could not be seen must also have been playing close by, for now and again a soft laugh could be heard ascending in the warm air which was so delightfully calm.

"Well," said Madame de Jonquiere by way of conclusion, "don't sleep then, as you don't wish to. But keep quite quiet, and it will rest you all the same."

Meantime Madame Vetu was expiring in the adjoining bed. They had not dared to take her to the Grotto, for fear they should see her die on the way. For some little time she had lain there with her eyes closed; and Sister Hyacinthe, who was watching, had beckoned to Madame Desagneaux in order to acquaint her with the bad opinion she had formed of the case. Both of them were now leaning over the dying woman, observing her with increasing anxiety. The mask upon her face had turned more yellow than ever, and now looked like a coating of mud; her eyes too had become more sunken, her lips seemed to have grown thinner, and the death rattle had begun, a slow, pestilential wheezing, polluted by the cancer which was finishing its destructive work. All at once she raised her eyelids, and was seized with fear on beholding those two faces bent over her own. Could her death be near, that they should thus be gazing at her? Immense sadness showed itself in her eyes, a despairing regret of life. It was not a vehement revolt, for she no longer had the strength to struggle; but what a frightful fate it was to have left her shop, her surroundings, and her husband, merely to come and die so far away; to have braved the abominable torture of such a journey, to have prayed both day and night, and then, instead of having her prayer granted, to die when others recovered!

However, she could do no more than murmur "Oh! how I suffer; oh! how I suffer. Do something, anything, to relieve this pain, I beseech you."

Little Madame Desagneaux, with her pretty milk-white face showing amidst her mass of fair, frizzy hair, was quite upset. She was not used to deathbed scenes, she would have given half her heart, as she expressed it, to see that poor woman recover. And she rose up and began to question Sister Hyacinthe, who was also in tears but already resigned, knowing as she did that salvation was assured when one died well. Could nothing really be done, however? Could not something be tried to ease the dying woman? Abbe Judaine had come and administered the last sacrament to her a couple of hours earlier that very morning. She now only had Heaven to look to; it was her only hope, for she had long since given up expecting aid from the skill of man.

"No, no! we must do something," exclaimed Madame Desagneaux. And thereupon she went and fetched Madame de Jonquiere from beside Marie's bed. "Look how this poor creature is suffering, madame!" she exclaimed. "Sister Hyacinthe says that she can only last a few hours longer. But we cannot leave her moaning like this. There are things which give relief. Why not call that young doctor who is here?"

"Of course we will," replied the superintendent. "We will send for him at once."

They seldom thought of the doctor in the wards. It only occurred to the ladies to send for him when a case was at its very worst, when one of their patients was howling with pain. Sister Hyacinthe, who herself felt surprised at not having thought of Ferrand, whom she believed to be in an adjoining room, inquired if she should fetch him.

"Certainly," was the reply. "Bring him as quickly as possible."

When the Sister had gone off, Madame de Jonquiere made Madame Desagneaux help her in slightly raising the dying woman's head, thinking that this might relieve her. The two ladies happened to be alone there that morning, all the other lady-hospitalers having gone to their devotions or their private affairs. However, from the end of the large deserted ward, where, amidst the warm quiver of the sunlight such sweet tranquillity prevailed, there still came at intervals the light laughter of the unseen child.

"Can it be Sophie who is making such a noise?" suddenly asked the lady-superintendent, whose nerves were somewhat upset by all the worry of the death which she foresaw. Then quickly walking

to the end of the ward, she found that it was indeed Sophie Couteau – the young girl so miraculously healed the previous year – who, seated on the floor behind a bed, had been amusing herself, despite her fourteen years, in making a doll out of a few rags. She was now talking to it, so happy, so absorbed in her play, that she laughed quite heartily. "Hold yourself up, mademoiselle," said she. "Dance the polka, that I may see how you can do it! One! two! dance, turn, kiss the one you like best!"

Madame de Jonquiere, however, was now coming up. "Little girl," she said, "we have one of our patients here in great pain, and not expected to recover. You must not laugh so loud."

"Ah! madame, I didn't know," replied Sophie, rising up, and becoming quite serious, although still holding the doll in her hand. "Is she going to die, madame?"

"I fear so, my poor child."

Thereupon Sophie became quite silent. She followed the superintendent, and seated herself on an adjoining bed; whence, without the slightest sign of fear, but with her large eyes burning with curiosity, she began to watch Madame Vetu's death agony. In her nervous state, Madame Desagneaux was growing impatient at the delay in the doctor's arrival; whilst Marie, still enraptured, and resplendent in the sunlight, seemed unconscious of what was taking place about her, wrapt as she was in delightful expectancy of the miracle.

Not having found Ferrand in the small apartment near the linen-room which he usually occupied, Sister Hyacinthe was now searching for him all over the building. During the past two days the young doctor had become more bewildered than ever in that extraordinary hospital, where his assistance was only sought for the relief of death pangs. The small medicine-chest which he had brought with him proved quite useless; for there could be no thought of trying any course of treatment, as the sick were not there to be doctored, but simply to be cured by the lightning stroke of a miracle. And so he mainly confined himself to administering a few opium pills, in order to deaden the severer sufferings. He had been fairly amazed when accompanying Doctor Bonamy on a round through the wards. It had resolved itself into a mere stroll, the doctor, who had only come out of curiosity, taking no interest in the patients, whom he neither questioned nor examined. He solely concerned himself with the pretended cases of cure, stopping opposite those women whom he recognised from having seen them at his office where the miracles were verified. One of them had suffered from three complaints, only one of which the Blessed Virgin had so far deigned to cure; but great hopes were entertained respecting the other two. Sometimes, when a wretched woman, who the day before had claimed to be cured, was questioned with reference to her health, she would reply that her pains had returned to her. However, this never disturbed the doctor's serenity; ever conciliatory, the good man declared that Heaven would surely complete what Heaven had begun. Whenever there was an improvement in health, he would ask if it were not something to be thankful for. And, indeed, his constant saying was: "There's an improvement already; be patient!" What he most dreaded were the importunities of the lady-superintendents, who all wished to detain him to show him sundry extraordinary cases. Each prided herself on having the most serious illnesses, the most frightful, exceptional cases in her ward; so that she was eager to have them medically authenticated, in order that she might share in the triumph should cure supervene. One caught the doctor by the arm and assured him that she felt confident she had a leper in her charge; another entreated him to come and look at a young girl whose back, she said, was covered with fish's scales; whilst a third, whispering in his ear, gave him some terrible details about a married lady of the best society. He hastened away, however, refusing to see even one of them, or else simply promising to come back later on when he was not so busy. As he himself said, if he listened to all those ladies, the day would pass in useless consultations. However, he at last suddenly stopped opposite one of the miraculously cured inmates, and, beckoning Ferrand to his side, exclaimed: "Ah! now here is an interesting cure!" and Ferrand, utterly bewildered, had to listen to him whilst he described all the features of the illness, which had totally disappeared at the first immersion in the piscina.

At last Sister Hyacinthe, still wandering about, encountered Abbe Judaine, who informed her that the young doctor had just been summoned to the Family Ward. It was the fourth time he had gone thither to attend to Brother Isidore, whose sufferings were as acute as ever, and whom he could only fill with opium. In his agony, the Brother merely asked to be soothed a little, in order that he might gather together sufficient strength to return to the Grotto in the afternoon, as he had not been able to do so in the morning. However, his pains increased, and at last he swooned away.

When the Sister entered the ward she found the doctor seated at the missionary's bedside. "Monsieur Ferrand," she said, "come up-stairs with me to the Sainte-Honorine Ward at once. We have a patient there at the point of death."

He smiled at her; indeed, he never beheld her without feeling brighter and comforted. "I will come with you, Sister," he replied. "But you'll wait a minute, won't you? I must try to restore this poor man."

She waited patiently and made herself useful. The Family Ward, situated on the ground-floor, was also full of sunshine and fresh air which entered through three large windows opening on to a narrow strip of garden. In addition to Brother Isidore, only Monsieur Sabathier had remained in bed that morning, with the view of obtaining a little rest; whilst Madame Sabathier, taking advantage of the opportunity, had gone to purchase a few medals and pictures, which she intended for presents. Comfortably seated on his bed, his back supported by some pillows, the ex-professor was rolling the beads of a chaplet between his fingers. He was no longer praying, however, but merely continuing the operation in a mechanical manner, his eyes, meantime, fixed upon his neighbour, whose attack he was following with painful interest.

"Ah! Sister," said he to Sister Hyacinthe, who had drawn near, "that poor Brother fills me with admiration. Yesterday I doubted the Blessed Virgin for a moment, seeing that she did not deign to hear me, though I have been coming here for seven years past; but the example set me by that poor martyr, so resigned amidst his torments, has quite shamed me for my want of faith. You can have no idea how grievously he suffers, and you should see him at the Grotto, with his eyes glowing with divine hope! It is really sublime! I only know of one picture at the Louvre – a picture by some unknown Italian master – in which there is the head of a monk beatified by a similar faith."

The man of intellect, the ex-university-professor, reared on literature and art, was reappearing in this poor old fellow, whose life had been blasted, and who had desired to become a free patient, one of the poor of the earth, in order to move the pity of Heaven. He again began thinking of his own case, and with tenacious hopefulness, which the futility of seven journeys to Lourdes had failed to destroy, he added: "Well, I still have this afternoon, since we sha'n't leave till to-morrow. The water is certainly very cold, but I shall let them dip me a last time; and all the morning I have been praying and asking pardon for my revolt of yesterday. When the Blessed Virgin chooses to cure one of her children, it only takes her a second to do so; is that not so, Sister? May her will be done, and blessed be her name!"

Passing the beads of the chaplet more slowly between his fingers, he again began saying his "Aves" and "Paters," whilst his eyelids drooped on his flabby face, to which a childish expression had been returning during the many years that he had been virtually cut off from the world.

Meantime Ferrand had signalled to Brother Isidore's sister, Marthe, to come to him. She had been standing at the foot of the bed with her arms hanging down beside her, showing the tearless resignation of a poor, narrow-minded girl whilst she watched that dying man whom she worshipped. She was no more than a faithful dog; she had accompanied her brother and spent her scanty savings, without being of any use save to watch him suffer. Accordingly, when the doctor told her to take the invalid in her arms and raise him up a little, she felt quite happy at being of some service at last. Her heavy, freckled, mournful face actually grew bright.

"Hold him," said the doctor, "whilst I try to give him this."

When she had raised him, Ferrand, with the aid of a small spoon, succeeded in introducing a few drops of liquid between his set teeth. Almost immediately the sick man opened his eyes and heaved a deep sigh. He was calmer already; the opium was taking effect and dulling the pain which he felt burning his right side, as though a red-hot iron were being applied to it. However, he remained so weak that, when he wished to speak, it became necessary to place one's ear close to his mouth in order to catch what he said. With a slight sign he had begged Ferrand to bend over him. "You are the doctor, monsieur, are you not?" he faltered. "Give me sufficient strength that I may go once more to the Grotto, this afternoon. I am certain that, if I am able to go, the Blessed Virgin will cure me."

"Why, of course you shall go," replied the young man. "Don't you feel ever so much better?"

"Oh! ever so much better – no! I know very well what my condition is, because I saw many of our Brothers die, out there in Senegal. When the liver is attacked and the abscess has worked its way outside, it means the end. Sweating, fever, and delirium follow. But the Blessed Virgin will touch the sore with her little finger and it will be healed. Oh! I implore you all, take me to the Grotto, even if I should be unconscious!"

Sister Hyacinthe had also approached, and leant over him. "Be easy, dear Brother," said she. "You shall go to the Grotto after /dejeuner/, and we will all pray for you."

At length, in despair at these delays and extremely anxious about Madame Vetu, she was able to get Ferrand away. Still, the Brother's state filled her with pity; and, as they ascended the stairs, she questioned the doctor, asking him if there were really no more hope. The other made a gesture expressive of absolute hopelessness. It was madness to come to Lourdes when one was in such a condition. However, he hastened to add, with a smile: "I beg your pardon, Sister. You know that I am unfortunate enough not to be a believer."

But she smiled in her turn, like an indulgent friend who tolerates the shortcomings of those she loves. "Oh! that doesn't matter," she replied. "I know you; you're all the same a good fellow. Besides, we see so many people, we go amongst such pagans that it would be difficult to shock us."

Up above, in the Sainte-Honorine Ward, they found Madame Vetu still moaning, a prey to most intolerable suffering. Madame de Jonquiere and Madame Desagneaux had remained beside the bed, their faces turning pale, their hearts distracted by that death-cry, which never ceased. And when they consulted Ferrand in a whisper, he merely replied, with a slight shrug of the shoulders, that she was a lost woman, that it was only a question of hours, perhaps merely of minutes. All he could do was to stupefy her also, in order to ease the atrocious death agony which he foresaw. She was watching him, still conscious, and also very obedient, never refusing the medicine offered her. Like the others, she now had but one ardent desire – to go back to the Grotto – and she gave expression to it in the stammering accents of a child who fears that its prayer may not be granted: "To the Grotto – will you? To the Grotto!"

"You shall be taken there by-and-by, I promise you," said Sister Hyacinthe. "But you must be good. Try to sleep a little to gain some strength."

The sick woman appeared to sink into a doze, and Madame de Jonquiere then thought that she might take Madame Desagneaux with her to the other end of the ward to count the linen, a troublesome business, in which they became quite bewildered, as some of the articles were missing. Meantime Sophie, seated on the bed opposite Madame Vetu, had not stirred. She had laid her doll on her lap, and was waiting for the lady's death, since they had told her that she was about to die. Sister Hyacinthe, moreover, had remained beside the dying woman, and, unwilling to waste her time, had taken a needle and cotton to mend some patient's bodice which had a hole in the sleeve.

"You'll stay a little while with us, won't you?" she asked Ferrand.

The latter, who was still watching Madame Vetu, replied: "Yes, yes. She may go off at any moment. I fear hemorrhage." Then, catching sight of Marie on the neighbouring bed, he added in a lower voice: "How is she?"

Has she experienced any relief?"

"No, not yet. Ah, dear child! we all pray for her very sincerely. She is so young, so sweet, and so sorely afflicted. Just look at her now! Isn't she pretty? One might think her a saint amid all this sunshine, with her large, ecstatic eyes, and her golden hair shining like an aureola!"

Ferrand watched Marie for a moment with interest. Her absent air, her indifference to all about her, the ardent faith, the internal joy which so completely absorbed her, surprised him. "She will recover," he murmured, as though giving utterance to a prognostic. "She will recover."

Then he rejoined Sister Hyacinthe, who had seated herself in the embrasure of the lofty window, which stood wide open, admitting the warm air of the courtyard. The sun was now creeping round, and only a narrow golden ray fell upon her white coif and wimple. Ferrand stood opposite to her, leaning against the window bar and watching her while she sewed. "Do you know, Sister," said he, "this journey to Lourdes, which I undertook to oblige a friend, will be one of the few delights of my life."

She did not understand him, but innocently asked: "Why so?"

"Because I have found you again, because I am here with you, assisting you in your admirable work. And if you only knew how grateful I am to you, what sincere affection and reverence I feel for you!"

She raised her head to look him straight in the face, and began jesting without the least constraint. She was really delicious, with her pure lily-white complexion, her small laughing mouth, and adorable blue eyes which ever smiled. And you could realise that she had grown up in all innocence and devotion, slender and supple, with all the appearance of a girl hardly in her teens.

"What! You are so fond of me as all that!" she exclaimed. "Why?"

"Why I'm fond of you? Because you are the best, the most consoling, the most sisterly of beings. You are the sweetest memory in my life, the memory I evoke whenever I need to be encouraged and sustained. Do you no longer remember the month we spent together, in my poor room, when I was so ill and you so affectionately nursed me?"

"Of course, of course I remember it! Why, I never had so good a patient as you. You took all I offered you; and when I tucked you in, after changing your linen, you remained as still as a little child."

So speaking, she continued looking at him, smiling ingenuously the while. He was very handsome and robust, in the very prime of youth, with a rather pronounced nose, superb eyes, and red lips showing under his black moustache. But she seemed to be simply pleased at seeing him there before her moved almost to tears.

"Ah! Sister, I should have died if it hadn't been for you," he said. "It was through having you that I was cured."

Then, as they gazed at one another, with tender gaiety of heart, the memory of that adorable month recurred to them. They no longer heard Madame Vetu's death moans, nor beheld the ward littered with beds, and, with all its disorder, resembling some infirmary improvised after a public catastrophe. They once more found themselves in a small attic at the top of a dingy house in old Paris, where air and light only reached them through a tiny window opening on to a sea of roofs. And how charming it was to be alone there together – he who had been prostrated by fever, she who had appeared there like a good angel, who had quietly come from her convent like a comrade who fears nothing! It was thus that she nursed women, children, and men, as chance ordained, feeling perfectly happy so long as she had something to do, some sufferer to relieve. She never displayed any consciousness of her sex; and he, on his side, never seemed to have suspected that she might be a woman, except it were for the extreme softness of her hands, the caressing accents of her voice, the beneficent gentleness of her manner; and yet all the tender love of a mother, all the affection of a sister, radiated from her person. During three weeks, as she had said, she had nursed him like a child, helping him in and out of bed, and rendering him every necessary attention, without the slightest embarrassment or repugnance, the holy purity born of suffering and charity shielding them both the while. They were indeed far removed from the frailties of life. And when he became convalescent,

what a happy existence began, how joyously they laughed, like two old friends! She still watched over him, scolding him and gently slapping his arms when he persisted in keeping them uncovered. He would watch her standing at the basin, washing him a shirt in order to save him the trifling expense of employing a laundress. No one ever came up there; they were quite alone, thousands of miles away from the world, delighted with this solitude, in which their youth displayed such fraternal gaiety.

"Do you remember, Sister, the morning when I was first able to walk about?" asked Ferrand. "You helped me to get up, and supported me whilst I awkwardly stumbled about, no longer knowing how to use my legs. We did laugh so."

"Yes, yes, you were saved, and I was very pleased."

"And the day when you brought me some cherries – I can see it all again: myself reclining on my pillows, and you seated at the edge of the bed, with the cherries lying between us in a large piece of white paper. I refused to touch them unless you ate some with me. And then we took them in turn, one at a time, until the paper was emptied; and they were very nice."

"Yes, yes, very nice. It was the same with the currant syrup: you would only drink it when I took some also."

Thereupon they laughed yet louder; these recollections quite delighted them. But a painful sigh from Madame Vetu brought them back to the present. Ferrand leant over and cast a glance at the sick woman, who had not stirred. The ward was still full of a quivering peacefulness, which was only broken by the clear voice of Madame Desagneaux counting the linen. Stifling with emotion, the young man resumed in a lower tone: "Ah! Sister, were I to live a hundred years, to know every joy, every pleasure, I should never love another woman as I love you!"

Then Sister Hyacinthe, without, however, showing any confusion, bowed her head and resumed her sewing. An almost imperceptible blush tinged her lily-white skin with pink.

"I also love you well, Monsieur Ferrand," she said, "but you must not make me vain. I only did for you what I do for so many others. It is my business, you see. And there was really only one pleasant thing about it all, that the Almighty cured you."

They were now again interrupted. La Grivotte and Elise Rouquet had returned from the Grotto before the others. La Grivotte at once squatted down on her mattress on the floor, at the foot of Madame Vetu's bed, and, taking a piece of bread from her pocket, proceeded to devour it. Ferrand, since the day before, had felt some interest in this consumptive patient, who was traversing such a curious phase of agitation, a prey to an inordinate appetite and a feverish need of motion. For the moment, however, Elise Rouquet's case interested him still more; for it had now become evident that the lupus, the sore which was eating away her face, was showing signs of cure. She had continued bathing her face at the miraculous fountain, and had just come from the Verification Office, where Doctor Bonamy had triumphed. Ferrand, quite surprised, went and examined the sore, which, although still far from healed, was already paler in colour and slightly desiccated, displaying all the symptoms of gradual cure. And the case seemed to him so curious, that he resolved to make some notes upon it for one of his old masters at the medical college, who was studying the nervous origin of certain skin diseases due to faulty nutrition.

"Have you felt any pricking sensation?" he asked.

"Not at all, monsieur," she replied. "I bathe my face and tell my beads with my whole soul, and that is all."

La Grivotte, who was vain and jealous, and ever since the day before had been going in triumph among the crowds, thereupon called to the doctor. "I say, monsieur, I am cured, cured, cured completely!"

He waved his hand to her in a friendly way, but refused to examine her.

"I know, my girl. There is nothing more the matter with you."

Just then Sister Hyacinthe called to him. She had put her sewing down on seeing Madame Vetu raise herself in a frightful fit of nausea. In spite of her haste, however, she was too late with the basin;

the sick woman had brought up another discharge of black matter, similar to soot; but, this time, some blood was mixed with it, little specks of violet-coloured blood. It was the hemorrhage coming, the near end which Ferrand had been dreading.

"Send for the superintendent," he said in a low voice, seating himself at the bedside.

Sister Hyacinthe ran for Madame de Jonquiere. The linen having been counted, she found her deep in conversation with her daughter Raymonde, at some distance from Madame Desagneaux, who was washing her hands.

Raymonde had just escaped for a few minutes from the refectory, where she was on duty. This was the roughest of her labours. The long narrow room, with its double row of greasy tables, its sickening smell of food and misery, quite disgusted her. And taking advantage of the half-hour still remaining before the return of the patients, she had hurried up-stairs, where, out of breath, with a rosy face and shining eyes, she had thrown her arms around her mother's neck.

"Ah! mamma," she cried, "what happiness! It's settled!"

Amazed, her head buzzing, busy with the superintendence of her ward, Madame de Jonquiere did not understand. "What's settled, my child?" she asked.

Then Raymonde lowered her voice, and, with a faint blush, replied: "My marriage!"

It was now the mother's turn to rejoice. Lively satisfaction appeared upon her face, the fat face of a ripe, handsome, and still agreeable woman. She at once beheld in her mind's eye their little lodging in the Rue Vaneau, where, since her husband's death, she had reared her daughter with great difficulty upon the few thousand francs he had left her. This marriage, however, meant a return to life, to society, the good old times come back once more.

"Ah! my child, how happy you make me!" she exclaimed.

But a feeling of uneasiness suddenly restrained her. God was her witness that for three years past she had been coming to Lourdes through pure motives of charity, for the one great joy of nursing His beloved invalids. Perhaps, had she closely examined her conscience, she might, behind her devotion, have found some trace of her fondness for authority, which rendered her present managerial duties extremely pleasant to her. However, the hope of finding a husband for her daughter among the suitable young men who swarmed at the Grotto was certainly her last thought. It was a thought which came to her, of course, but merely as something that was possible, though she never mentioned it. However, her happiness, wrung an avowal from her:

"Ah! my child, your success doesn't surprise me. I prayed to the Blessed Virgin for it this morning."

Then she wished to be quite sure, and asked for further information. Raymonde had not yet told her of her long walk leaning on Gerard's arm the day before, for she did not wish to speak of such things until she was triumphant, certain of having at last secured a husband. And now it was indeed settled, as she had exclaimed so gaily: that very morning she had again seen the young man at the Grotto, and he had formally become engaged to her. M. Berthaud would undoubtedly ask for her hand on his cousin's behalf before they took their departure from Lourdes.

"Well," declared Madame de Jonquiere, who was now convinced, smiling, and delighted at heart, "I hope you will be happy, since you are so sensible and do not need my aid to bring your affairs to a successful issue. Kiss me."

It was at this moment that Sister Hyacinthe arrived to announce Madame Vetu's imminent death. Raymonde at once ran off. And Madame Desagneaux, who was wiping her hands, began to complain of the lady-assistants, who had all disappeared precisely on the morning when they were most wanted. "For instance," said she, "there's Madame Volmar. I should like to know where she can have got to. She has not been seen, even for an hour, ever since our arrival."

"Pray leave Madame Volmar alone!" replied Madame de Jonquiere with some asperity. "I have already told you that she is ill."

They both hastened to Madame Vetu. Ferrand stood there waiting; and Sister Hyacinthe having asked him if there were indeed nothing to be done, he shook his head. The dying woman, relieved by her first emesis, now lay inert, with closed eyes. But, a second time, the frightful nausea returned to her, and she brought up another discharge of black matter mingled with violet-coloured blood. Then she had another short interval of calm, during which she noticed La Grivotte, who was greedily devouring her hunk of bread on the mattress on the floor.

"She is cured, isn't she?" the poor woman asked, feeling that she herself was dying.

La Grivotte heard her, and exclaimed triumphantly: "Oh, yes, madame, cured, cured, cured completely!"

For a moment Madame Vetu seemed overcome by a miserable feeling of grief, the revolt of one who will not succumb while others continue to live. But almost immediately she became resigned, and they heard her add very faintly, "It is the young ones who ought to remain."

Then her eyes, which remained wide open, looked round, as though bidding farewell to all those persons, whom she seemed surprised to see about her. She attempted to smile as she encountered the eager gaze of curiosity which little Sophie Couteau still fixed upon her: the charming child had come to kiss her that very morning, in her bed. Elise Rouquet, who troubled herself about nobody, was meantime holding her hand-glass, absorbed in the contemplation of her face, which seemed to her to be growing beautiful, now that the sore was healing. But what especially charmed the dying woman was the sight of Marie, so lovely in her ecstasy. She watched her for a long time, constantly attracted towards her, as towards a vision of light and joy. Perhaps she fancied that she already beheld one of the saints of Paradise amid the glory of the sun.

Suddenly, however, the fits of vomiting returned, and now she solely brought up blood, vitiated blood, the colour of claret. The rush was so great that it bespattered the sheet, and ran all over the bed. In vain did Madame de Jonquiere and Madame Desagneaux bring cloths; they were both very pale and scarce able to remain standing. Ferrand, knowing how powerless he was, had withdrawn to the window, to the very spot where he had so lately experienced such delicious emotion; and with an instinctive movement, of which she was surely unconscious, Sister Hyacinthe had likewise returned to that happy window, as though to be near him.

"Really, can you do nothing?" she inquired.

"No, nothing! She will go off like that, in the same way as a lamp that has burnt out."

Madame Vetu, who was now utterly exhausted, with a thin red stream still flowing from her mouth, looked fixedly at Madame de Jonquiere whilst faintly moving her lips. The lady-superintendent thereupon bent over her and heard these slowly uttered words:

"About my husband, madame – the shop is in the Rue Mouffetard – oh! it's quite a tiny one, not far from the Gobelins. – He's a clockmaker, he is; he couldn't come with me, of course, having to attend to the business; and he will be very much put out when he finds I don't come back. – Yes, I cleaned the jewelry and did the errands – " Then her voice grew fainter, her words disjointed by the death rattle, which began. "Therefore, madame, I beg you will write to him, because I haven't done so, and now here's the end. – Tell him my body had better remain here at Lourdes, on account of the expense. – And he must marry again; it's necessary for one in trade – his cousin – tell him his cousin – "

The rest became a confused murmur. Her weakness was too great, her breath was halting. Yet her eyes continued open and full of life, amid her pale, yellow, waxy mask. And those eyes seemed to fix themselves despairingly on the past, on all that which soon would be no more: the little clockmaker's shop hidden away in a populous neighbourhood; the gentle humdrum existence, with a toiling husband who was ever bending over his watches; the great pleasures of Sunday, such as watching children fly their kites upon the fortifications. And at last these staring eyes gazed vainly into the frightful night which was gathering.

A last time did Madame de Jonquiere lean over her, seeing that her lips were again moving. There came but a faint breath, a voice from far away, which distantly murmured in an accent of intense grief: "She did not cure me."

And then Madame Vetu expired, very gently.

As though this were all that she had been waiting for, little Sophie Couteau jumped from the bed quite satisfied, and went off to play with her doll again at the far end of the ward. Neither La Grivotte, who was finishing her bread, nor Elise Rouquet, busy with her mirror, noticed the catastrophe. However, amidst the cold breath which seemingly swept by, while Madame de Jonquiere and Madame Desagneaux – the latter of whom was unaccustomed to the sight of death – were whispering together in agitation, Marie emerged from the expectant rapture in which the continuous, unspoken prayer of her whole being had plunged her so long. And when she understood what had happened, a feeling of sisterly compassion – the compassion of a suffering companion, on her side certain of cure – brought tears to her eyes.

"Ah! the poor woman!" she murmured; "to think that she has died so far from home, in such loneliness, at the hour when others are being born anew!"

Ferrand, who, in spite of professional indifference, had also been stirred by the scene, stepped forward to verify the death; and it was on a sign from him that Sister Hyacinthe turned up the sheet, and threw it over the dead woman's face, for there could be no question of removing the corpse at that moment. The patients were now returning from the Grotto in bands, and the ward, hitherto so calm, so full of sunshine, was again filling with the tumult of wretchedness and pain – deep coughing and feeble shuffling, mingled with a noisome smell – a pitiful display, in fact, of well-nigh every human infirmity.

II

THE SERVICE AT THE GROTTA

ON that day, Monday, the crowd at the Grotto, was enormous. It was the last day that the national pilgrimage would spend at Lourdes, and Father Fourcade, in his morning address, had said that it would be necessary to make a supreme effort of fervour and faith to obtain from Heaven all that it might be willing to grant in the way of grace and prodigious cure. So, from two o'clock in the afternoon, twenty thousand pilgrims were assembled there, feverish, and agitated by the most ardent hopes. From minute to minute the throng continued increasing, to such a point, indeed, that Baron Suire became alarmed, and came out of the Grotto to say to Berthaud: "My friend, we shall be overwhelmed, that's certain. Double your squads, bring your men closer together."

The Hospitality of Our Lady of Salvation was alone entrusted with the task of keeping order, for there were neither guardians nor policemen, of any sort present; and it was for this reason that the President of the Association was so alarmed. However, Berthaud, under grave circumstances, was a leader whose words commanded attention, and who was endowed with energy that could be relied on.

"Be easy," said he; "I will be answerable for everything. I shall not move from here until the four-o'clock procession has passed by."

Nevertheless, he signalled to Gerard to approach.

"Give your men the strictest instructions," he said to him. "Only those persons who have cards should be allowed to pass. And place your men nearer each other; tell them to hold the cord tight."

Yonder, beneath the ivy which draped the rock, the Grotto opened, with the eternal flaring of its candles. From a distance it looked rather squat and misshapen, a very narrow and modest aperture for the breath of the Infinite which issued from it, turning all faces pale and bowing every head. The statue of the Virgin had become a mere white spot, which seemed to move amid the quiver of the atmosphere, heated by the small yellow flames. To see everything it was necessary to raise oneself; for the silver altar, the harmonium divested of its housing, the heap of bouquets flung there, and the votive offerings streaking the smoky walls were scarcely distinguishable from behind the railing. And the day was lovely; never yet had a purer sky expanded above the immense crowd; the softness of the breeze in particular seemed delicious after the storm of the night, which had brought down the over-oppressive heat of the two first days.

Gerard had to fight his way with his elbows in order to repeat the orders to his men. The crowd had already begun pushing. "Two more men here!" he called. "Come, four together, if necessary, and hold the rope well!"

The general impulse was instinctive and invincible; the twenty thousand persons assembled there were drawn towards the Grotto by an irresistible attraction, in which burning curiosity mingled with the thirst for mystery. All eyes converged, every mouth, hand, and body was borne towards the pale glitter of the candles and the white moving speck of the marble Virgin. And, in order that the large space reserved to the sick, in front of the railings, might not be invaded by the swelling mob, it had been necessary to inclose it with a stout rope which the bearers at intervals of two or three yards grasped with both hands. Their orders were to let nobody pass excepting the sick provided with hospital cards and the few persons to whom special authorisations had been granted. They limited themselves, therefore, to raising the cords and then letting them fall behind the chosen ones, without heeding the supplications of the others. In fact they even showed themselves somewhat rough, taking a certain pleasure in exercising the authority with which they were invested for a day. In truth, however, they were very much pushed about, and had to support each other and resist with all the strength of their loins to avoid being swept away.

While the benches before the Grotto and the vast reserved space were filling with sick people, handcarts, and stretchers, the crowd, the immense crowd, swayed about on the outskirts. Starting from the Place du Rosaire, it extended to the bottom of the promenade along the Gave, where the pavement throughout its entire length was black with people, so dense a human sea that all circulation was prevented. On the parapet was an interminable line of women – most of them seated, but some few standing so as to see the better – and almost all carrying silk parasols, which, with holiday-like gaiety, shimmered in the sunlight. The managers had wished to keep a path open in order that the sick might be brought along; but it was ever being invaded and obstructed, so that the carts and stretchers remained on the road, submerged and lost until a bearer freed them. Nevertheless, the great tramping was that of a docile flock, an innocent, lamb-like crowd; and it was only the involuntary pushing, the blind rolling towards the light of the candles that had to be contended against. No accident had ever happened there, notwithstanding the excitement, which gradually increased and threw the people into the unruly delirium of faith.

However, Baron Suire again forced his way through the throng. "Berthaud!

Berthaud!" he called, "see that the /defile/ is conducted less rapidly.

There are women and children stifling."

This time Berthaud gave a sign of impatience. "Ah! hang it, I can't be everywhere! Close the gate for a moment if it's necessary."

It was a question of the march through the Grotto which went on throughout the afternoon. The faithful were permitted to enter by the door on the left, and made their exit by that on the right.

"Close the gate!" exclaimed the Baron. "But that would be worse; they would all get crushed against it!"

As it happened Gerard was there, thoughtlessly talking for an instant with Raymonde, who was standing on the other side of the cord, holding a bowl of milk which she was about to carry to a paralysed old woman; and Berthaud ordered the young fellow to post two men at the entrance gate of the iron railing, with instructions only to allow the pilgrims to enter by tens. When Gerard had executed this order, and returned, he found Berthaud laughing and joking with Raymonde. She went off on her errand, however, and the two men stood watching her while she made the paralysed woman drink.

"She is charming, and it's settled, eh?" said Berthaud. "You are going to marry her, aren't you?"

"I shall ask her mother to-night. I rely upon you to accompany me."

"Why, certainly. You know what I told you. Nothing could be more sensible. The uncle will find you a berth before six months are over."

A push of the crowd separated them, and Berthaud went off to make sure whether the march through the Grotto was now being accomplished in a methodical manner, without any crushing. For hours the same unbroken tide rolled in – women, men, and children from all parts of the world, all who chose, all who passed that way. As a result, the crowd was singularly mixed: there were beggars in rags beside neat /bourgeois/, peasants of either sex, well dressed ladies, servants with bare hair, young girls with bare feet, and others with pomatumed hair and foreheads bound with ribbons. Admission was free; the mystery was open to all, to unbelievers as well as to the faithful, to those who were solely influenced by curiosity as well as to those who entered with their hearts faint with love. And it was a sight to see them, all almost equally affected by the tepid odour of the wax, half stifling in the heavy tabernacle air which gathered beneath the rocky vault, and lowering their eyes for fear of slipping on the gratings. Many stood there bewildered, not even bowing, examining the things around with the covert uneasiness of indifferent folks astray amidst the redoubtable mysteries of a sanctuary. But the devout crossed themselves, threw letters, deposited candles and bouquets, kissed the rock below the Virgin's statue, or else rubbed their chaplets, medals, and other small objects of piety against it, as the contact sufficed to bless them. And the /defile/ continued, continued without end during days and months as it had done for years; and it seemed as if the whole world, all the miseries and sufferings

of humanity, came in turn and passed in the same hypnotic, contagious kind of round, through that rocky nook, ever in search of happiness.

When Berthaud had satisfied himself that everything was working well, he walked about like a mere spectator, superintending his men. Only one matter remained to trouble him: the procession of the Blessed Sacrament, during which such frenzy burst forth that accidents were always to be feared.

This last day seemed likely to be a very fervent one, for he already felt a tremor of exalted faith rising among the crowd. The treatment needed for miraculous care was drawing to an end; there had been the fever of the journey, the besetting influence of the same endlessly repeated hymns, and the stubborn continuation of the same religious exercises; and ever and ever the conversation had been turned on miracles, and the mind fixed on the divine illumination of the Grotto. Many, not having slept for three nights, had reached a state of hallucination, and walked about in a raged dream. No repose was granted them, the continual prayers were like whips lashing their souls. The appeals to the Blessed Virgin never ceased; priest followed priest in the pulpit, proclaiming the universal dolour and directing the despairing supplications of the throng, during the whole time that the sick remained with hands clasped and eyes raised to heaven before the pale, smiling, marble statue.

At that moment the white stone pulpit against the rock on the right of the Grotto was occupied by a priest from Toulouse, whom Berthaud knew, and to whom he listened for a moment with an air of approval. He was a stout man with an unctuous diction, famous for his rhetorical successes. However, all eloquence here consisted in displaying the strength of one's lungs in a violent delivery of the phrase or cry which the whole crowd had to repeat; for the addresses were nothing more than so much vociferation interspersed with "Ayes" and "Paters."

The priest, who had just finished the Rosary, strove to increase his stature by stretching his short legs, whilst shouting the first appeal of the litanies which he improvised, and led in his own way, according to the inspiration which possessed him.

"Mary, we love thee!" he called.

And thereupon the crowd repeated in a lower, confused, and broken tone:

"Mary, we love thee!"

From that moment there was no stopping. The voice of the priest rang out at full swing, and the voices of the crowd responded in a dolorous murmur:

"Mary, thou art our only hope!"

"Mary, thou art our only hope!"

"Pure Virgin, make us purer, among the pure!"

"Pure Virgin, make us purer, among the pure!"

"Powerful Virgin, save our sick!"

"Powerful Virgin, save our sick!"

Often, when the priest's imagination failed him, or he wished to thrust a cry home with greater force, he would repeat it thrice; while the docile crowd would do the same, quivering under the enervating effect of the persistent lamentation, which increased the fever.

The litanies continued, and Berthaud went back towards the Grotto. Those who defiled through it beheld an extraordinary sight when they turned and faced the sick. The whole of the large space between the cords was occupied by the thousand or twelve hundred patients whom the national pilgrimage had brought with it; and beneath the vast, spotless sky on that radiant day there was the most heart-rending jumble of sufferers that one could behold. The three hospitals of Lourdes had emptied their chambers of horror. To begin with, those who were still able to remain seated had been piled upon the benches. Many of them, however, were propped up with cushions, whilst others kept shoulder to shoulder, the strong ones supporting the weak. Then, in front of the benches, before the Grotto itself, were the more grievously afflicted sufferers lying at full length; the flagstones disappearing from view beneath this woeful assemblage, which was like a large, stagnant pool of

horror. There was an indescribable block of vehicles, stretchers, and mattresses. Some of the invalids in little boxes not unlike coffins had raised themselves up and showed above the others, but the majority lay almost on a level with the ground. There were some lying fully dressed on the check-patterned ticks of mattresses; whilst others had been brought with their bedding, so that only their heads and pale hands were seen outside the sheets. Few of these pallets were clean. Some pillows of dazzling whiteness, which by a last feeling of coquetry had been trimmed with embroidery, alone shone out among all the filthy wretchedness of all the rest – a fearful collection of rags, worn-out blankets, and linen splashed with stains. And all were pushed, squeezed, piled up by chance as they came, women, men, children, and priests, people in nightgowns beside people who were fully attired being jumbled together in the blinding light of day.

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